



Journey to Healing

A newsletter for survivors of suicide

Second Quarter 2012

Journey to Healing is a newsletter for survivors of suicide. Survivors are those of us whose lives have been changed by the completion of suicide by someone we knew. Journey to Healing is intended to let survivors know that you are not alone. If you would like to contribute an article or story for this newsletter, please send it to: Becky Kay, c/o Mental Health America of Greenville County 429 North Main Street, Suite 2, Greenville, SC 29601.

Survivors of Suicide Support Group – this group meets the 1st Tuesday of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. There is also a closed program for eight weeks designed to help adults, teens and children.

As we grow and recover, it is important to remember that the most powerful aid that SOS can provide new survivors is the companionship of others who have endured the same type of pain. For SOS to work at its best, we must continue going to meetings to help others after we no longer need to go to be helped.

SOS Support Team

This team of survivors who volunteer their time to reach out to survivors in need is available to anyone who feels the need to share with another survivor by phone or personal visit in between meetings. Please call CRISISline at 864 271-8888 to arrange a call or visit from a team member.

Let's Talk About It: A Primer for When Someone You Love Has Died by Suicide

~ Miki Tesh, LCSW

Talking about someone who died is very hard to do. It can be even more difficult when the person died from suicide. Others may be reacting in similar or very different ways, but all feelings and reactions are normal, no matter what they are. It's so important to find supportive and caring people we trust to talk about how we feel.

When someone dies from suicide, one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome is stigma. Stigma is an undeserving and negative label that others put on someone, and it is very unfair to those who experience it. We might feel like we must hide the truth because we worry that others will judge us. Because many people are not educated about what it feels like to be someone grieving from suicide, we might be embarrassed, afraid others will treat us differently, or look down on us.

Some people may avoid talking about the person who died because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. They might even be afraid that suicide could happen in their family, to them, or to a friend. Other people might be upset because suicide has already happened in their family. It may surprise you to know that there are others out there who have experienced suicide, even though we often do not know who they are.

You have total control over whether or not you tell people what happens in your life. It is your decision completely. You should feel comfortable with the people you want to talk with, and you can choose to share as little or as much as you wish. Remember, whether you choose to tell someone everything or nothing at all, that choice is your right.

Take some time to think about how you want to respond to people's questions. You will want to be prepared so you are not caught off guard. For many of us, it is hard to describe what happened. We can simply say, "It was because of suicide." If you do not want to let people know how the person died, you could say that you, "do not want to talk about it right now." You can tell people, "because it is too sad to talk about it." You could say that the person died "suddenly, and for unknown reasons" because, truly, we often do not know exactly why a person chooses suicide. It is your decision. You need to feel comfortable in how you address others. There is no right or wrong way to talk about what happened.

We may never know why someone died by suicide. Most likely, the person was not himself or herself when he or she died. It is very reassuring and comforting for us to

remember that the person loved us very much. When we remember them for their good loving qualities, we celebrate them in ways that are helpful for us and others who knew them. Find different ways to celebrate that person's life, whether through pictures, stories, music, art, personal memories, funny stories, or objects that have memories.

When we remember how much we love a person, it also is very common to feel like we could have done something to prevent the death. We usually have some feelings of guilt, as if we were somehow responsible for what happened. Sometimes people blame others for the suicide. But, when someone dies from suicide, it is no one's fault. We can never know why someone chose to harm him or herself. Most likely, the person had been experiencing problems and could not think clearly. They forgot to ask for help or talk about their feelings to feel better when life was difficult. They forgot that all problems get better over time. And they forgot that they are very important to others. Always remember, nothing you said, did, or thought could have caused this to happen.

Because it is normal to worry that we could have prevented someone from harming him or herself, one of our biggest fears is that suicide might happen again. We may even worry that the child of the person who died might do the same thing. Although there is sometimes a family connection, most all people who have a family history of suicide do not go on to do the same thing. We always can learn from every situation. Keep in mind that everyone in life has, at some point, experienced desperation or vulnerability. Always tell people you trust how you are doing and feeling, and talk about problems freely in safe environments. Continue to search for ways to make the situation better. People die by suicide because they did not talk about their feelings in ways that would help them. This is why it is so important to be open and honest while looking for ways to improve how we feel about ourselves.

When grieving, one of the more normal feelings is isolation. At times, we may feel especially isolated when someone is insensitive about suicide or about the person who died. When people are insensitive, they probably mean well but they are misinformed about grief and suicide. Most people struggle with what to say. Unfortunately, our society does not educate others about how to talk about grief and suicide. As a result, when people avoid talking about it, or make insensitive remarks, we tend to feel alone and different. We may also isolate ourselves and avoid talking about it with others. This can feel very lonely. Bear in mind that there are many families nearby who have experienced suicide, but you just haven't always heard about them. We are never alone, and all families go through difficulties. It helps us realize we are normal and connected when we find thoughtful caring people to talk to.

Feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and isolation are not the only common feelings. Anger also is often mixed up with other emotions. We may be angry with other people. For some, it is spiritually comforting to believe that we all grow emotionally and spiritually, even after we die. Our thoughts and feelings are always changing, and although the person decided to end his or her life during that very small window of time, logically, we can assume that that person's thoughts and feelings do not stay the same. In order to understand ourselves and develop as spiritual people, we have to experience deep feelings. This is also a normal part of grieving. Painful emotions get better over time, but it is a slow process that needs to happen gradually over time.

After a while, you may notice that you will feel and talk differently about what happened. As we become comfortable sharing and trusting others, we open up about our feelings in ways that can be very positive for us. As we talk through grief feelings, other unexpected feelings will emerge. This is very normal, and it helps in the long run when new thoughts and feelings inevitably come up. It is a positive experience when we become comfortable with our feelings, stronger as an individual, and hopefully are able to help others in the long run.

We cannot change what happened, but we can learn from our own and other's experiences. Our loved one had and continues to have a lot to offer us in life and after he or she has died. We can learn to live in positive ways, help ourselves when needed, and appreciate the good times we had with that person.

Remember, always talk about feelings in ways that help you feel better and understand situations better. We always can improve how we feel about every situation that happens. All problems change and improve over time, especially when we seek out help from others. Every situation in life is an opportunity to learn about who we are and how we want to live every day.

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Miki Tesh, LCSW, is a social work doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin. Her interests are in children's grief,
particularly when caused by a violent death. Her email address is: mikitesh@yahoo.com.*

Some Answers for Those New to Suicide Loss

Tony Salvatore

Losing someone that you love or someone to whom you are very close to suicide is the most devastating loss of all. Nothing in your life has prepared you for it. No one is ever ready for it. These are some brief answers to some of the questions that may be on your mind:

Why did this happen? It happened because your loved one felt psychological pain so severe and unbearable that they believed it could only be stopped if they died. The pain was caused by depression, which was caused by something in their life and/or in their brain. Drinking or using drugs make things much worse where they are present.

Why didn't I know? Most don't know the symptoms of depression or the warning signs of suicide. Many of those suffering depression hide it and some suicidal individuals don't show any signs of their risk or danger. Even when there is some concern it is very hard to accept that someone you know so well is in mortal danger of suicide. Being life-affirming and non-suicidal makes it hard to recognize the opposite states in others.

Why didn't my loved one tell me? Some may find it hard to ask for help or to admit to mental illness, even if it may be temporary. Some may feel shame at being suicidal. Intense pain is distracting and consuming. It makes those suffering self-centered. It takes away the sense of control. It doesn't mean that they didn't care for or love those suffering because of the loss. Tunnel vision is part of being suicidal.

Why didn't somebody do something? Even professionals sometimes have a hard time seeing that someone's suicidal. Misplaced concerns about privacy and confidentiality may deter warnings to others. There are no reliable predictors of suicide.

Why do I feel like I'm going crazy? You have suffered the greatest and most horrible emotional shock of your life. Suicide is a severe traumatic loss ~ sudden, unexpected, and violent. You feel betrayed, out of control, disoriented, and hurt. This is what happens after a suicide. Nobody's ever ready for it, and it overwhelms anyone whom it directly affects.

Why can't I get over this? The loss is too fresh and you are traumatized. The first weeks and months are very hard and your emotions may be in turmoil for a long time. You never really "get over" your loss, but you eventually come to terms with it.

Why doesn't anything help me? You can be helped. Start by seeing your doctor. She or he may be able to recommend services or medications that may help. You can go to a suicide loss support group or talk to a grief specialist, counselor, or clergy person. You can find information and people to talk to on-line.

Reprinted with permission of the author, Tony Salvatore, in memory of son Paul.

<http://lifegard.tripod.com/questions.html>

I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell. They are telling in the sense that they tell what is perhaps the central paradox of our condition – that what we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else. It is important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are – even if we tell it only to ourselves – because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing. It is important to tell our secrets too because it makes it easier that way to see where we have been in our lives and where we are going. It also makes it easier for other people to tell us a secret or two of their own, and exchanges like that have a lot to do with what being a family is all about and what being human is all about. Finally, I suspect that it is by entering that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept that we come perhaps closer than we do anywhere else to the One who, whether we realize it or not, is of all our secrets the most telling and the most precious we have to tell.

Frederich Buechner
Telling Secrets



Within Our Circle – A Broken Heart Still Beats If This Helps...

I was often told, after the suicide of my son, that there is a gift in every tragedy ~ a silver lining. An unknown thought to most of us at that time...

Fourteen long years later, I do have to admit I have found gifts. Gifts of courage, of strength, of sense of humor about things simply out of my control. Here are a few things that I know I handle completely differently than “before”:

1. When I hear of a tragedy, a death, a diagnosis, I have no fear about picking up the phone, sending a card or grief book. Where I used to fool myself into believing the bereaved “needed space,” I now know even in their self-imposed place of hiding, they need to know people are with them. A simple card, email, or phone message is a lot more than most know how to do.

2. When I have a medical “scare,” or loss of my own, my mind’s grief muscle memory goes straight through Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages at warp speed. I know I’ll get through it. Of course, I don’t skip stages and I am not automatically “through” it, but there always is that end-of-the tunnel light keeping me plodding along. That light was impossible to see during the first year after my mother’s death. Now I know it’s there, like a beacon. I can find it.

3. I take life’s setbacks in stride. My poor mother didn’t have the strength to get through one more rough patch and ended her life. I know I don’t have that option because now that I know first-hand what it does to those left behind, I could never do it myself. I know that no matter how sad and rough the times might be, there always is hope. I healed from my own mother’s suicide—I can get through most anything!

4. I treat people better. I can’t say I never make an inappropriate comment towards a bad driver (just ask my daughter), but boy, do I feel differently now. When someone spaces out at a stop light, rather than honking my horn, I imagine that person might have had a horrible day. Perhaps he even lost someone today and is traveling in a fog. Goodness knows, I drove like a moron for several months after my horrible day.

5. I don’t take things personally. Iris Bolton (famed author and my support group leader—lucky me!) tried to teach me that for years, but I really didn’t get it. Now, I finally do. When someone hurts me, it often does say more about them than it does me. If only my mother could have had thicker skin. But because of her, I now do. Hey, a gift.

So, yes, I am strong like a bull, my skin is like rubber, what you throw at me bounces off me back onto you. I can’t say it still isn’t hard. I can’t say it still doesn’t hurt. But it’s not the predominant thought in my mind when I think of Bobby. Instead, the thought that comes to mind is him at age four. The family cat had a litter of kittens and we played with them for hours. Cereal for dinner that night; we had more important things to do ~ life, youth, playfulness, worry-free afternoons. ***THAT*** helps.



Inspirational

During the month of June we celebrate Father's Day. Like Mother's Day we set a day apart to honor our fathers in a very special way. This can be a very painful day for fathers who are grieving the death of a child to suicide. It is also a very painful day for those survivors who are grieving the death of a father or grandfather from suicide. As always, it is important to commemorate these days and to remember fathers and also to be aware that this day can be very painful for people who are grieving either for a deceased child or for a deceased father or grandfather. The lesson to be learned is to be sensitive to the feelings of people around us and to address the situation and not to try to make it better by attempting to put a positive spin to a painful situation. The world around us tries to cover over painful situations instead of addressing the elephant in the room. We are encouraged to identify the elephant and talk about it and not to pretend that the elephant is not there. It is there and it must be addressed.

Years ago I remember a few men who were part of the SOS family talking about meeting people in stores or on the street and these people would inquire about how a wife was doing or other members of the family were doing since losing a loved one to suicide. These men were puzzled and hurt and angry, because these same people failed to ask the men how they were doing. The people might have passed over these men, because they just presumed that the men were doing alright. The puzzlement and the anger and the hurt stemmed from the fact that the people inquiring presumed that the men were doing alright when in fact they were hurting and were just as devastated from the suicide as the other members of the family were.

Some segments of society are under the false illusion that men do not feel pain or grief with the same intensity as women. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact of the matter is that men feel pain and grief with the same intensity as women. Sometimes men might not be as expressive as women with their feelings, but it is false to conclude that because the feelings are not expressed that the feelings are not felt or are not present. I can see why men might be angry if someone inquires about a wife or other members of a family and ignores inquiring about how the father is doing. The fact of the matter is that men hurt as deeply as women do and also love as deeply as women do. The love of women has been extolled and written about in verse and song. What about the love that men experience? Why not write songs or poems about the love that men either express or feel?

It is time to address that the feelings of men are real and deep. Not all men personify the Marlboro Man. That image does a great disservice to the male population. Men have the same makeup as women in terms of feelings. Men get hurt. Men feel great pain. Sometimes men might project the "tough guy" image. Such men might be under the impression that to show feelings is a sign of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is not a sign of weakness to either feel feelings or to admit that one is having some feelings. Sometimes people express that "they are getting stronger with the feelings of grief because they are not crying as often or as hard." There again is a sign of a false illusion. Such an expression is equating the feelings with being weak. The expressing of feelings is not a sign of weakness. The expressing of feelings is nothing more than admitting that one is human. Feelings

are signs of being human and having human emotions and feelings. Unfortunately, some in society are of the opinion that feelings are signs of weakness and maybe men don't want to be perceived as being weak. We do men a disservice by perpetuating such a false image. Crying is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that one has human emotions, and when someone is sad or grieving, tears are most appropriate and it is allowable and should be encouraged to be expressed. The Marlboro Man is dead and the image of the Marlboro Man is a false impression of the men in society. Allow the men in families the encouragement and the opportunity to express their true feelings with other members of the family.

The challenge will be for the men in the families to make use of the opportunity to be honest with their feelings and to shrug off the impression that feelings are a sign of weakness. It is more than acceptable to be tender and warm and loving. Such behavior should be encouraged. It is time to break down the barriers that prevent men from being able to express their feelings of warmth and tenderness. Men feel the same feelings as women and should be able to express them in the same fashion as women. No one should look askance if a man cries or shows signs of tenderness to other men. Men love deeply and men hurt deeply. Allow men the opportunity to express these feelings without the fear of being perceived as a "softie." Feelings are not soft. They are a part of the makeup of every human being – male as well as female. Men should be accorded the same opportunities to express their feelings as women.

It would be nice to live in a society free of all stereotypes. To allow men the free rein to express their feelings of grief and sadness is a step in the right direction. Stereotypes categorize people and put them in categories that inhibit the freedom of expression of feelings. It is time to either eliminate the stereotypes or at least break them down because they hinder people and prevent them from truly expressing how they are feeling. Let's be honest with our feelings.

As always we want to assure each member of the SOS family of our thoughts and prayers on a daily basis during our quiet time, and we encourage each of you to do the same for each other – especially for those who have recently joined our family. Let's have a special remembrance for those members for whom Father's Day is going to be particularly painful.



Reminder: *Don't forget that we are now meeting twice a month – the first and third Tuesday of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church on Augusta Road in Greenville. Mark your calendar and help us spread the word to those who may not know this. The first Tuesday we will meet in the Green Room, and the third Tuesday we will have someone at the same door and we will meet upstairs. We hope this will bring more comfort and encouragement to all of you, especially the newer members who have just joined our group. You are encouraged to attend both groups to get the most help as you travel this difficult journey. You will have different facilitators at each meeting, so you can meet and hear stories from people who have traveled this road and regained strength to reach out and find the gifts and imperfect peace that comes only from a loss to suicide.*

Also remember that we are available to talk if you wish a call back ~ this is particularly helpful to newly bereaved people and families.

You are held close and we hope to see you at both meetings.



Reflections by Becky

“It sometimes takes deep suffering, grief, or loss to awaken us. . . . It only takes a few seconds to receive [the] news. Yet, when you put the phone down, you are already standing in a different world. All you know has just been rendered unsure, tenuous. And it is in that unknown, in that mystery place, that lies the invitation to stay awake.”

Healing Light Meditation

We have had a series of deaths to occur in our lives, of which suicide had no part of any of them with the exception of one.....and her death was a slow death by addiction. However, all of these deaths brought back convoluted memories and grief rears its head in our faces each time we experience new grief. The old grief joins with the new grief and it takes its toll on us. I learned from a counselor to do the following meditation to release anxiety and help place things back to the imperfect peace of loss. I hope they will help you as you move through your own loss of a loved one to suicide and as each new loss, anticipated or unanticipated, enters into each life, as it will, unfortunately.

Take a few moments to become comfortable. Let your body relax. Shake out any tightness, constriction, or tension. Pay attention to your breathing. Take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly, taking in cleansing oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. As you breathe out, imagine that all that represents tightness and constriction within your body is released through your breath on a thin film of grey smoke. As you breathe in, imagine that you are breathing in cleansing light. Do this four times, each time becoming more and more relaxed and letting go of any tightness or anything that is restricting you.

Now close your eyes and imagine that you are looking at a lit candle. Notice the shape of the candle, the color of the wax. Notice the color, shape and movement of the flame. Notice how the flame dances and shimmers. Notice its many colors dancing together, blending, and separating. Feel the warmth and light that the flame emits. It is soft, gentle, soothing. It is a flame of hope and healing. Now envision the flame becoming bigger and bigger until its glow fills the entire space of this room. Visualize ribbons of light extending from the flame. Feel the ribbons of light as they reach you. Feel them touch your skin and caress you. Now imagine many small flames branching off from these ribbons like leaves falling from the trees in autumn. These small flames grow smaller and smaller, so small that you can no longer see them. These tiny, microscopic flames penetrate your skin as they become one with you.

Feel this healing light as it flows through your body like a river of light, bathing every cell. Feel this healing light as it washes every cell clean, carrying away any fatigue, disease, heaviness or pain. As this healing light travels through your body, imagine that it is dissolving any darkness within you and around you. Imagine that the light fills you completely and your body glows as the light gives you energy and brings healing, hope, and wholeness to you and to everything around you. Hold on to that image as you take a few deep breaths and slowly open your eyes. Know that this light of hope, healing, and wholeness is there.

Grace and peace,
Becky



A Healing Journey

Last year my daughter Clare and I took a healing trip to the Grand Canyon. I had always wanted to see this great “Natural Wonder of the World,” and when Adam died, Clare thought to hold out to me the hope of going on this healing journey together. It was three years after Adam’s death before I felt well enough to venture on the promised trip.

The Grand Canyon is a vision of the vastness of time. Its breathtaking beauty was created by nature over millennia. The expansive panoramas of rock seemed as endless and mysterious as the processes that formed them.

Although as mother and daughter Clare and I had a few inevitable spats during our week together, it was a deeply healing trip. The journey, a pilgrimage really, revived my reverence for the inherent beauty of life. It took me out of my pain and showed to me the hugeness of time. The pain and chaos I experienced from Adam’s suicide had seemed like they would surely go on forever, but in the Grand Canyon I saw that time was bigger than that. I saw that even the most destructive forces can shape a landscape of incomparable beauty.

After as monumental an experience as the suicide of my son, well-meaning platitudes about time’s healing powers came up often. If not infuriating, they were at the very least annoying. I know that each moment of my pain felt as slow and endlessly torturous as each drop of the Colorado River that carved the Grand Canyon. It was inconceivable that this excruciating grief could ever end its course. But I saw in the canyon that it was not my pain that would endure. I saw hope. I saw healing on a grand scale.

I doubt that any of this is comforting to those of you who are now in the throes of immediate grief over the suicide of someone you love. I know that your pain is so intense that you can hardly remember what your life was like *before*, and you certainly cannot imagine a peaceful *after*. I can only tell you that I came through, scarred, but hopeful and grateful for so many things. Hold onto that hope in your life. Eventually, time will roll over you, and you will find, looking back, that this tortuous mourning was not endless, that it could not endure forever.

With compassion,
Alice Baird

If you are interested in having a part in the *Journey to Healing* Newsletter we welcome your poems, articles, newspaper clippings or readings that have been helpful to you. This newsletter should be not only an instrument of healing, encouragement and education but also a reflection of who we, the survivors are and who we have become. We need your help and input to make this meaningful for everyone and invite your feedback to tell us what additional information you would like to see addressed. Thanks!

*Companioning is not about
assessing, analyzing, fixing
or resolving another's grief.
Instead, it is about being
totally present to the
mourner, even being a
temporary guardian of his
soul..*

And that's what we do at SOS

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Bringing wellness home.....